

Broome County Courthouse
Court St.
Binghamton
Broome County
New York

HABS No. NY-5617

HABS
NY,
4-BING,
19-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. NY-5617

BROOME COUNTY COURT HOUSE

Location: Court Street, Court House Square, Binghamton, Broome County, New York

Present Owner: Broome County

Present Occupant: Broome County

Present Use: Court rooms with chambers

Brief Statement
of Significance:

The site of the Broome County Court House, Court House Square, was the property of William Bingham, proprietor of the Bingham Patent from which the City of Binghamton was formed. The site and subsequent buildings upon it have a long association with legal matters and the development of Binghamton from village to city. As the County Court House, it is an example of a Renaissance Revival building and one of the best known buildings in the city and county, thus making it a regional landmark.

PART I. HISTORIC INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and Subsequent Owners:

The site of the present Court House (Court House Square) was conveyed to Broome County after the death of William Bingham, proprietor of Bingham's Patent, on February 7, 1804. (See Bowers, "More Light on the Bingham"). During his lifetime, Bingham had pledged land for public use, specifically for a court house, jail and other public buildings. Since 1804, the property has been in the possession of Broome County.

2. Date of erection: 1897-1898; the date on the cornerstone is July 31, 1897.

3. Architect:

The Court House was designed by Isaac G. Perry, well known architect in New York State and surrounding areas in the late nineteenth century. He began his practice in New York City but moved to Binghamton in 1863 or 1864 after having spent much time there as the supervising architect for the New York State Inebriate Asylum. In

April, 1883, Perry rose to state-wide prominence when he was appointed to the office of Capitol Commissioner by Governor Cleveland. Perry was selected as the architect for the present Court House after a vote by the Board of Supervisors on February 3, 1897. The Board had studied the proposed designs of four other architects in addition to Perry and had decided to accept his design at an estimate of \$82,395.62 for a stone structure. Perry had specified that a building of steel and brick construction would cost several thousand dollars more. Other buildings in the City of Binghamton accredited to Isaac Perry are the Perry Block, Strong Commercial Block and the Phelps's Bank Building; the latter two structures are no longer standing.

4. Original plan and construction:

The present Court House stands upon the same site and in part uses the same foundation walls of the former Court House, built in 1857 and destroyed by fire on December 28, 1896. In a message to Common Council at their meeting on January 4, 1897, Mayor George E. Green stated that he would "personally prefer to see the Court House repaired and restored, so far as possible, to its old style." (See Binghamton City Government, Proceedings of the Common Council, 1896-1897). Investigations during January and February of 1897 proved to the City government's satisfaction that restoration was not feasible. Although actual restoration did not occur, the present Court House does follow, to some extent, the design of the third Court House. Both are nineteenth-century classical revival buildings, but differing in materials used and in ornamentation.

The Court House is constructed of grey Ohio sandstone with bluestone trimmings. The six free-standing Ionic columns are of solid stone. The gabled roof is of terracotta tiles. The front portico is wider on the present Court House than on the previous one. The pediment contains a carved stone seal of Broome County. The design for the seal was created by Col. John Broome, the Lieutenant Governor of New York State for whom the county was named. Circular windows, resembling portholes, penetrate the entire cornice. The copper dome is eight-sided and has four clocks positioned at right angles to each other. The first clock placed in the dome was a gift of Harvey Westcott, a prominent cigar manufacturer in the City of Binghamton. A total of seven chimneys are visible on the roof. Except for rather minor changes, such as the partitioning of large rooms into several offices, the interior is the same as originally built.

5. Builder or contractor, suppliers:

The contractor for the present Court House was Miles Leonard, who had resided in Binghamton since 1871. The total cost for the contract was \$130,000.00 which included furnishings and ground improvements. Leonard was also associated with other work in Binghamton including the Stone Opera House, the powerhouse of the Binghamton Railroad Company, and the Court Street and East End Railroad Company of which he was the first supervisor (1886). He was also the contractor for the Broome County Jail and Sheriff's residence, built in 1888, which also stood on the Court House Square site.

6. Alterations and additions:

An addition of a south wing to the main building was completed in 1917. The contract was awarded to the Schaefer Construction Company of New York City for \$65,679.00 on February 25, 1916. The addition is one hundred feet long by forty-eight feet wide, three floors in height and fireproof.

A motor vehicle garage was built in 1971 and is attached to the Court House basement by a stone tunnel. The tunnel was formerly used for moving prisoners to and from the jail.

B. Historic Events and Persons Associated with the Building:

Binghamton began as a small village named Chenango Point located in Tioga County. (Broome County was not set off from Tioga County until March 28, 1806.) Prior to the building of the first Court House, court was held alternately in New Town (Elmira) and at Chenango, Town of Union, at the home of Joshua Whitney, land agent for Bingham's Patent. Following the establishment of jury districts in 1801, court was held at the house of General Whitney, located near the northwest corner of Court and Water Streets. In 1802, the first Court House was built at the northwest corner of Court and Chenango Streets, the present site of the Perry Block. It measured 24' by 36' and had an attached two-cell log jail. Court was held on the second floor of this building. The site of the present Court House was transferred from William Bingham in 1804. At this time and through the early nineteenth century, Court House Square was a hill standing about twenty-five feet higher than the present level of Court Street. In subsequent years the level of this hill was lowered as the soil was removed and used for fill along Court Street to the Chenango River. The first Court House was moved across the street onto the Square, at the northwest corner, sometime after 1806.

The second Court House never stood on the Square; it occupied a site between Collier and Exchange Streets, across from the Square. In 1828, the Board of Supervisors approved the sum of \$5,000.00 for the construction of a new court house having deemed the first building too small to suit their needs and the needs of the County. The actual building costs exceeded the monies given. The structure, completed in 1829, was of brick and contained both the court rooms and jail facilities. Unlike the present structure, the entrance to the second Court House was on the west side. A desire to separate the court rooms from the jail coupled with the growth of the City led the Board of Supervisors to the decision that a new structure was necessary.

A third Court House was completed in 1857 at the cost of \$32,000.00. Prior to the construction, Court House Square was leveled again. Until the grading was completed around the new building, the Court House appeared to stand below Court Street. East and west wings were added to the building in 1890 by contractor Alexander B. Carman for \$19,000.00. The actual design of the Court House was executed by a County native, John Stuart Wells. All expansion and relocation of County offices was complete in late 1890, just six years before this third Broome County Court House was destroyed by fire.

The present Court House has been designated a landmark by the Binghamton Commission on Architecture and Urban Design.

C. Sources of Information

1. Old Views:

The Broome County Historical Society files at the Roberson Center for the Arts and Sciences.

Art Work of Binghamton. The Gravure Illustration Co. Chicago, Illinois, 1902. Broome County Historical Society in the Roberson Center for the Arts and Sciences. A view appears in Part I.

Binghamton Illustrated. H. R. Page and Co. 1890. Broome County Historical Society in the Roberson Center for the Arts and Sciences. Includes a view of the third Court House.

Souvenir of Binghamton, issued by the Binghamton Railroad Company, Binghamton, New York. 1898. Broome County Historical Society in the Roberson Center for the Arts and Sciences. A view appears on page 19.

Roberson Center is located at 30 Front Street, Binghamton, New York.

2. Bibliography

- Binghamton City Government, Proceedings of the Common Council, 1896-97. Broome County Historical Society in the Roberson Center for the Arts and Sciences.
- Binghamton Republican, issues of December 29, 1890, February 4, 1897 and August 2, 1897. Binghamton Public Library. Microfilm.
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- Broome County Planning Department. Preliminary National Register Nomination Form, December 26, 1972.
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PART II. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records are part of the documentation of structures in the Southern Tier of New York State, undertaken by HABS in cooperation with the Broome County Historical Society and the Valley Development Foundation, Inc.

The project was under the general supervision of John Poppeliers, Chief of the Historic American Buildings Survey. The historical material was prepared by Tania Werbizky, April, 1974. The project was edited for deposit in the Library of Congress by Constance Werner Ramirez, August, 1974.